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Making the connections between the academy and social movements

Jim Crowther and Eurig Scandrett

Introduction

The extraordinary and dramatic changes in the political landscape of Scotland in the years following political devolution in 1999, and more particularly before and after the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014 illustrate the role in which social movement action continues to shape social and political change, and educational possibilities. In this article we want to highlight the nature of this conjuncture and why it is encouraging in terms of making connections between the academy and radical intellectual work. We do not want to prioritise 'optimism of the will' over 'pessimism of the intellect' but what is required, for sure, is determination to make hope possible and realistic. We illustrate our argument by referring to work that we are respectively involved in on the subjects of learning for democracy and against gender violence. We will present these examples after locating our work theoretically and in the context of the significant changes in the marketization and funding of higher education.

Theorising our practice

We draw on social movement learning theory and in particular on the work of Ettore Gelpi to position ourselves and our reading of the current context for radical work (see Scandrett et al. 2010). One of the central thrusts of Gelpi's analysis of lifelong education was that learning needs and educational opportunities occur in diverse contexts inside and outside educational institutions. In particular, wherever these

occur the needs and opportunities have to be understood dialectically in relation to the conflicts and contradictions embedded in the wider context. In such situations the role of the educator is not to impose an ideological analysis or value system on learners, but to help make explicit the nature of the contradictions and the actions that can be taken individually and collectively to address them. In Gramscian (1981) terms these conflicts and contradictions provide space for a 'war of position' in which counter-hegemonic struggles can be developed. As Gelpi acknowledged 'in every society there is some degree of autonomy for educational action, some possibility for political confrontation, and at the same time an interrelation between the two' (Gelpi 1979: 11).

In our view the significance of engaging in supporting and developing learning opportunities in the contradictions people experience are that such contexts provide micro, meso and macro educative experiences that can be capitalised on. By the micro we mean the self and group directed learning stimulated by issues which animate people individually and severally. By the meso level we mean the opportunities that critical educational encounters generate for reframing the experiences that people reflect on by making connections between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' (in C. Wright Mills' terms). At the macro level educational action becomes a counter-hegemonic project as contradictions in addressing public

issues through conventional channels are experienced and become visible through the curriculum for analysis, and in turn become part of a context to act in and against. In other words, the macro level involves questioning the canopy of assumptions which inform everyday assumptions and practices.

What is critically significant from the above is the need to develop the curriculum of struggle from the inherent features of the contradictions themselves. The struggle for democracy in Scotland and the struggle for gender equality are two particularly pertinent examples of contradictions that provide both motivation for learning and generative themes that can galvanise different types of social and political action that have micro, meso and macro educational dimensions. Academics in the academy, interested in such issues, need to make the opportunity to engage in communities outside its walls in order to generate opportunities for radical curriculum development for social justice. We emphasise the importance of making the opportunities because this is part of the academic task. We need to be thinking dialectically in that there are contradictions in the academy which constrain and open up possibilities for practice.

Higher Education (HE): the Scottish context

There are important variations between Higher Education policy within the UK. Scottish Higher Education has always had a degree of autonomy which is constantly in tension with the influence of its larger neighbour in the UK, England. George Davie (1961) famously critiqued the loss of what he called the 'democratic intellect' in Scottish Universities as they became closer to the professional specialisms of England. In more recent times, Scotland has diverged significantly from the rest of the UK in relation to undergraduate tuition fees. Tuition fees were introduced in the UK by Tony Blair's 'New Labour' administration in 1998. However, when the Scottish National Party (SNP) formed a minority government in Scotland 2007, fees for undergraduates were abolished and state funding for Scottish (and European Union)

domiciled undergraduate students was reintroduced. Moreover, the rhetoric informing this policy change played on the commitment to social mobility based on academic ability, rather than the ability to pay, and on the benefits of HE to society as well as the economy. These broadly meritocratic and social democratic arguments resonated with a useful egalitarian myth that Scottish education is more inclusive, accessible and generalist compared to its southern neighbour. Subsequently, the SNP Government initiated a review of the future of Scottish HE and established a commission into HE governance, with a view to making university management more open and democratic.

Despite the divergence in policy and rhetoric, the market and globalizing forces affecting universities in Scotland are very similar to those experienced elsewhere in the UK and beyond. Academics are under pressure to teach more and to publish more in the academic market environment. This has resulted in competition for scarce research funding and, in the UK, a metric based system of research assessment quality through the so-called Research Excellence Framework (REF), a system which applies also to Scottish universities. There is also competition for undergraduate students from the rest of the UK, who pay fees in Scotland, and international students who pay much higher tuition fees, primarily at postgraduate level, who are seen as a lucrative source of income. The twin pressures of student fees and research competition, amongst others, make the job of the academic geared more towards generating income rather than addressing social justice. However, there are contradictory forces also at play that generate spaces for academics to commit to communities of endurance and struggle outside the academy. Social impact is one criterion used in REF assessments and this can be used critically and creatively to legitimate a range of work. Social impact can include hard economic indicators such as 'start-up' companies but they can also refer to engagement in communities with a wider range of social, environmental

and political interests. At the same time, an emphasis on 'widening participation' ensures that some pedagogical work with people involved with community and social movement activism is legitimated. In some respects, being located on the academic margins of the university such as in adult and community education provides opportunities to engage outside the university in line with the need for social impact, i.e. to publish in less prestigious but more critical journals and pursue small self-funded research projects rather than to publish in mainstream journals or obtain major research grants

Two examples we discuss below refer to such opportunities. The first involves the work of Scandrett in developing links with agencies and organisations outside the Academy to challenge gender violence. The second refers to the work of Crowther in relation to exploiting the democratic possibilities in the current Scottish context.

Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence

The history of the establishment of a course on Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence at Queen Margaret University is testament to the role of social movements in developing educational provision as a means to address social issues. Queen Margaret University itself is a product of the women's movement's campaign for access to education for women in the late nineteenth century. Feminist activists Flora Stevenson and Christian Guthrie Wright established the Edinburgh School of Cookery and Domestic Economy in 1875 to provide access to the skills and knowledge needed by working class women in Edinburgh to access the principal source of employment: domestic service. By iteration and expansion, the Edinburgh School of Cookery became Queen Margaret University in 2007 (Begg 1994).

The women's movement of the 20th century made considerable progress in making the private politics of the domestic sphere into a matter of public policy. The struggle against violence against women has been a core com-

ponent of feminist activism, especially since the second wave movement in the 1960s and 70s focused attention on the politics of personal lives and intimate relationships. Refuges for women fleeing domestic violence were an important source of praxis for the movement (Dobash/Dobash 1992). Such refuges not only provided protection from violence and practical welfare support – and in many cases saved lives – they also became a source of feminist knowledge generation and exposed the role which domestic abuse plays in the 'continuum of violence' against women (Kelly 1988), the reproduction and policing of patriarchal social relations, the gendered division of labour and the commodification of women's sexuality (Jeffreys 2008, Dines et al. 1998, Whisnant/Stark 2004, Stark 2009).

In the UK, Women's Aid emerged as the organisational leader of the refuge movement and of feminist politics, a social movement organisation with roots in the lived experience of women escaping domestic violence and other forms of abuse. In Scotland, local Women's Aid groups established Scottish Women's Aid (SWA) as an umbrella and facilitative organisation to support the local refuge-based action and to take forward the campaigning priorities and other emergent policy issues of the movement. Along with other parts of the feminist movement in Scotland, SWA succeeded in ensuring that a gendered understanding of domestic violence, and the connection between tackling domestic abuse, violence against women and gender inequality, was reflected in Scottish Government policy. The Scottish Government established a 'National Training Strategy to Address Violence Against Women' with a role of facilitating education and training on violence against women in Scotland, based in SWA. One of the platforms for education was the provision of accredited higher education.

The collaboration between the training forum, SWA and QMU led to a module Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence, accessible by activists, volunteers and professionals working in

the field of gender and violence, and also as an option for honours year full time students of psychology and sociology. The module is taught by educators from SWA as well as QMU staff. The style of pedagogy facilitated a dialogical curriculum based on the experience of SWA and others working in the field; the academic literature; and the personal gendered experience of patriarchal social relations of both external activists and full time students (Orr et al 2013).

The curriculum is explicitly framed as a 'war of position', a contribution to shifting meanings in the performance of gender in both private and public space. Outcomes have included changes to midwifery practices in relation to Female Genital Mutilation and the provision of materials at Edinburgh clubs to combat sexual harassment. Moreover, the curriculum provides an opportunity to connect between gendered violence and capitalist politics, by focusing on such contested areas of feminist critique as prostitution, trafficking, the feminisation of migration, pornography, the beauty industry and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation. The meteoric rise in these practices associated with the large-scale investment of capital provides for a critique of the political economy of gendered violence and a dialogue between class struggle and the politics of the women's movement.

Here is an area of contestation within the women's movement. For example, the issue of prostitution / sex work is a focus of intense debate within the movement, with sex workers' unions claiming feminist legitimacy in demanding workers' rights and protection for prostitutes, whilst critical feminists mobilise against prostitution as gendered violence and for supporting prostituted women to leave the profession. Whilst often played out in meso-level narratives of militant particularism of feminists and prostitutes' unions, such points of contestation provide the opportunity to shift to a macro-level counter-hegemonic struggle against the interface of patriarchal social relations and neoliberal penetration of

market relations into all aspects of social life (Cox/Nilsen 2014).

Learning for democracy in Scotland

Scotland has been at the centre of widespread international interest over the past few years particularly in relation to the referendum on Scottish independence that took place in September 2014. For decades, Scotland has experienced a rise in 'civic nationalism': a renaissance in popular culture and identity and a political indignation against the democratic deficit from being united with the considerably larger (and, in recent times, politically conservative) England. However, the conversion of civic nationalism into political independence was limited. One of the reasons why the UK government agreed to the independence referendum in the first place was based on the visible lack of support for the case for secession in the years preceding it. Scottish independence was central to the policy of the SNP since its foundation; however, it was an argument that failed to have popular appeal in the years preceding the referendum with only around 20 % of voters supporting it (Devine 2016). By September 2014 this had increased dramatically to 45 % – insufficient to achieve independence but a massive shock to the unionist case for a United Kingdom. In the final stages of the referendum campaign, the unionist parties (an unholy alliance of Right and Left wing parties) resorted to barely hidden fear tactics and bribery. Why should so many people wish to leave one of the world's most successful economic unions? Moreover, after the historic vote something equally dramatic happened. The Scottish Labour Party, which had ruled Scotland politically for at least four decades and more, were almost wiped out politically in the 2015 UK general election

How can we explain such political changes underway and what opportunities do they present for radical educational practice? Is the voting evidence simply an example of more insular and regressive forms of nationalism emerging as a way of dealing with wider global economic changes? In other words, does it

amount to a 'burying your head in the sand' approach to economic meltdown, a hostile political environment and a small country with little power to change things?

The interrelated events leading up to the Scottish referendum and the arguments for independence are complex and only a schematic analysis can be presented here. In a recent publication from an influential Scottish historian, Tom Devine (2016), he makes four points that help to explain the closeness of the referendum result. Firstly, the growth of an authoritarian model of intervention in Scottish affairs, witnessed since 1979 with Thatcherite neoliberalism, transformed the 'hands off' unionism that characterised the UK-Scottish relationship which had lasted for over 300 years. Secondly, the onset of deindustrialisation during this era, particularly in coal, steel and manufacturing, had a significant impact on the social base of the traditional working class heartlands of Scotland. Thirdly, devolution in Scotland which was introduced by the new Labour Blair government, in 1999, created an electoral opportunity for the SNP. The system of proportional representation enabled small parties to capitalise on it through parliamentary representation. The unthinkable then happened in 2007 when the SNP actually won minority control of the government and in 2011 achieved an outright majority. What made the party popular was its capacity to provide 'social democratic' benefits: free university tuition for undergraduate students, free health care for the elderly and a commitment to the National Health Service which, in the rest of the UK, was rapidly going in the direction of marketised services. Fourthly, along with preserving these valued institutions and policies was an aura of competence and ability which previous administrations seemed to lack. The SNP seemed to be able to produce more with fewer resources available to them. In Gramscian terms, the case for the union was experiencing a long-term organic crisis which has been averted, at least for the moment.

The political popularity for independence had little to do with Scottish identity or narrow-minded nationalism – indeed, 'my country right or wrong'-nationalism was expressed considerably more amongst the UK patriots than the Scots. It was clearly linked to the rise of the SNP as a credible political alternative in Scotland but, in addition, it also went well beyond the SNP. The campaign for independence was spearheaded by the SNP along with the smaller, left wing parties: Greens and Socialists, whose parliamentary representation had declined as the SNP's grew. Once the question of Scottish independence was put a wide range of social and political movements in civil society and communities generated their own self-educational opportunities to think through the case for independence and to imagine their vision for what their country might be. The location of these groups outside the official media of politics – political parties, television and national press – meant there was a much wider political agenda than the mainstream one. The Radical Independence Campaign, Women for Independence, Scots Asians for Independence, Africans for an Independent Scotland, Commonweal, and hundreds of other groups of all sorts of ideological persuasion began to discuss the possibility of fresh alternatives to the dominant system of politics. The sum total of initiatives 'kick started' participation in political thinking with family, friends, neighbours and strangers, online and offline, in educational settings, in streets, in restaurants, buses and workplaces and wherever people could. The franchise was extended to 16 and 17 year olds, and voter registration initiatives engaged the most disenfranchised amongst the unemployed and homeless. Of course the quality and range of debate would vary. The important point is that it was creating a process of open and inclusive participation in political thinking; who knows where it might stop? If the nationalist or unionist political agenda had started the arguments they could not control their direction and implications.

We are not making the claim that there was a large, coherent, popular rejection of neoliberal-

alism which suddenly emerged and provided an alternative base for radical learning and education. The process was as important as the issues themselves in that people were engaged in talking politics and thinking politically. The significant outcome is that the Referendum generated an appetite for political thinking which all previous periods of Scottish politics, possibility since 1945, had channelled into political parties and media elites. Political thinking for a time was 'in the streets'; things had changed.

It is in this more open political context that the prospects for education and learning for democracy have emerged. What is more there is increasing interest amongst educators to engage with the political context in their work because the changes that have affected the population generally are also ones that are shaping how educators are beginning to think about their practice. It is difficult to say how widespread this is but there is certainly evidence of it underway. A series of three national events on Learning for Democracy has attracted many educators working in communities, discussing and sharing ideas about how their work can contribute to a democratic agenda. Community education practitioners analysed how their profession had changed from espousing a responsive approach to working in communities from 'the bottom up', with a broad social justice interest, to one now dominated by policy targets and the language of new public management (see Fraser 2015).

These events were inspired and organised by various adult educational agencies and the academy. They reflect a widespread interest to be engaging with communities in political thinking and to bring to this an enthusiasm for grassroots politics. It is probably inconceivable that this would have happened pre-referendum to the same extent. It is more the overt sign of interest of communities in politics against the backdrop of wider political changes underway in the UK and Europe that have been influencing events. Obviously there needs to be caution in the claims made for

this. Political education can merely be about socialising people into the dominant system and there are plenty of examples of citizenship education which fit this description. The aftermath of the referendum is still being fought, with horse-trading amongst political parties replacing the vibrancy of popular debate. Political education can, nevertheless, create spaces for a more open and participatory politics and for learning opportunities that reflect the spirit of the current conjuncture. This is, we contend, a useful and radicalising contribution to be made to developing the possibilities of social change at the micro and meso level.

The 'back story' to the above development – the macro level – has to bring into the analysis the contradictions generated by the structural relations of capitalism in the context of globalisation and the experience of political equality that a more participatory politics created. Scott and Mooney (2009) describe how the SNP government has achieved a narrative which combines social democratic rhetoric with neoliberal practice. Democracy and capitalism are often in tension and in exploring this relationship new possibilities can emerge to counter the hegemonic liberal political framing which separates politics from economics. However, there is nothing inevitable about what unfolds. One possibility is that the political process is 'rescued' by the political elite who shape the narratives of choices around their own party agendas. In other words, the space for politics and political thinking is closed down to run along a 'politics as usual' approach i.e. one where most people are excluded from debating the issues but are expected to legitimate them by voting. Another possibility, less likely perhaps but worth arguing for, is that the process of engagement in politics continues and is furthered by educational work with social movements for change as well as with a wide variety of grassroots groups. If this continues, the contradictions between political processes and economic ones, that is, democratic participation in the former but not the latter can become a question to debate. This involves shifting the 'back story' of capitalism

to become the 'front story' as the dialectics of democracy and capitalism have to be addressed. It is the contradiction in this relationship which needs to be explored educationally for new political possibilities to emerge.

Conclusion

Academics in the academy are unlikely to be the spearhead of progressive social and political change but they can be part of the struggle for a better world through their work inside and outside the academy, as the two examples presented above demonstrate. The alternative is to be a bystander. To avoid this academics have to maximise their 'relative autonomy' in a difficult context. They have to seize the opportunities to enable the wider public, particularly the oppressed and exploited in society, to be able to benefit from resources of the academy and intellect. We hope the examples we have provided of current work, from different universities, both resonate with the work of other academics in different contexts or provide some inspiration and insight into the possibilities of building alliances for progressive social change.

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